Partnership for Aflatoxin Control in Africa (PACA)

Within the context of the Continental Blueprint for agricultural growth and economic development, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) has emerged as an initiative of the African leaders to help African countries reach and sustain a higher path of economic growth through agricultural-led development. The overall CAADP goal is to eliminate hunger and reduce poverty through agriculture. To do this, African governments have agreed to increase public investment in agriculture by a minimum of 10 per cent of their national budgets and to raise agricultural productivity by at least 6 per cent.

The aflatoxin challenge has constituted a significant concern to food security and poverty eradication on the continent. It is a major cause of post-harvest loss that further constrains the quantum of food reaching our markets and households across the continent. Aflatoxins can impact domestic and international trade of affected commodities. Many countries have established regulations to limit human and animal exposure to aflatoxins. Aflatoxin contamination and the safety regulations, including sanitary and phytosanitary standards (SPS), to prevent aflatoxin exposure can result in loss of revenues and profit from domestic commerce and international trade. Producers, traders, and processors incur operating costs as they strive to meet the standards. If they fail to comply, additional costs arise from rejection of shipments; increased rates of sampling at borders; and in the worst case, loss of access to foreign markets.

In addition, it poses a major public health challenge to consumers all over the continent. Aflatoxin is a toxin produced by mold that can damage the liver and may lead to liver cancer. Aflatoxin is a problem particularly in undeveloped and developing countries. Chronic exposure to even low doses of aflatoxin can lead to adverse health effects. Evidence abounds that aflatoxin ingestion through contaminated foodstuffs is one of the major etiological factors in human hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) in China and sub-Saharan Africa. In certain regions, at least 250,000 deaths from HCC occur, annually. Aflatoxins are linked to suppression of the immune system, which lowers the body's defenses against disease. Some experts suspect an association between chronic aflatoxin exposure and child stunting, which is widely recognized as a major human and development problem throughout Africa.

According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 25 percent of world food crops are affected by aflatoxin, and countries that are situated between 40ºN and 40ºS of the equator all around the globe are most at risk. While aflatoxin control measures are implemented in developed and international markets, many of the 1 billion people who live on less than $1 per day rely on their own agricultural production for food, which can contain harmful levels of aflatoxin.

The Partnership for Aflatoxin Control for Africa (PACA) aims to support adoption of proven solutions, and identify new ones, that will work to mitigate the impacts of aflatoxin on food security and agriculture, trade, and health in Africa. Many actors are involved in developing comprehensive solutions to control aflatoxin along the value chain, from crop production to processing to food preparation to consumption. Many measures can be taken to reduce aflatoxin exposure to local consumers and improve opportunities to sell aflatoxin-safe crops to markets, but measures need to be supported by appropriate policy and regulatory actions. It is expected that comprehensive and feasible solutions being developed for the African context will also be useful for other regions where aflatoxin is a problem.

Through the leadership of the African Union Commission (AUC), and with participation from African and other governments, Regional Economic Communities, the private sector, farmers' organizations, and civil society leaders from across Africa, PACA is establishing a comprehensive, Africa-wide approach to mitigate the agriculture and food security, trade, and health impacts of aflatoxin. Participants in the seventh CAADP Partnership Platform (PP) in March 2011 urged that the AUC oversee the establishment of a Continental SPS Working Group to mainstream SPS matters in the CAADP framework and establish an Africa-led Partnership for Aflatoxin Control. Combating aflatoxin will also contribute to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and PACA will look for ways to contribute to the MDGs and the post 2015 development agenda.

In 2012, the AUC worked with a diverse Interim Steering Committee, representing interests across sectors in Africa, to develop structures and approaches for effective functioning of PACA. PACA was formally launched by the AUC in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, following the commemoration of African Day for Food and Nutrition Security (ADFNS), on 31 October 2012. The PACA Steering Committee Members were inaugurated during the launch and held their first meeting on 1 November 2012. They will continue to develop PACA's strategies and activities in the coming years in order to increase food security and health of African people. Also in 2012, a number of major new aflatoxin control initiatives were launched in Africa (for an overview of current aflatoxin activities in Africa, please visit: http://www.aflatoxinpartnership.org/en/Activities_in_Africa.aspx). More information is available at: http://www.aflatoxinpartnership.org.